

Literature review



Some of the questions the review of the literature can answer

Adapted from Hall, C. (1981). Doing a literature review: Reaching the social science research imagination. London, Sage, p. 14. Source: The Learning Centre, www.library.ox.ac.uk

Literature review

- Also found under a heading of “Background”
- It is a formal survey of professional (i.e. not popular magazines) literature that is pertinent to your particular question.
- Number one reason to do a lit review: It can stop you from being a fool.

Literature review

- Why do a literature review?
 - Understand what is known & unknown about a topic
 - Understand problems other researchers have had studying the issue
 - You can always find some type of literature on a topic:
 - Never say nothing has been written/done/collected on the subject
 - » “No published literature was found...”

Parts of literature review

1. General historical background

- Provides context to the issue:
- What other people have been asking about the issue
- Illustrates gaps or weaknesses where more research is needed
- Perhaps provides justification that a study is needed



Parts of literature review

2. Methods used to study the issue:

- What methods have been used to collect data on the topic?
- Which method or methods seem most logical or favorable for your study?
- With each method, what success or failure has been recorded in the literature?

How to evaluate a method identified in the literature:

- **Soundness:** is it reasonable? Don't assume that just because it is published means that it is a good method
 - Also, how long ago was it published? Methods fall in and out of favor for various reasons: perhaps recognized as a method whose results are flawed
- **Relevance** to your topic and to obtain the data you want (not the results you want but the data)

How to evaluate a method identified in the literature:

- **Design quality:** how the method and data collection was set up
- **Types of findings:** if you need numbers and the method gives you letters, then the method isn't for you.

Other things to look at in Methods

- What are the pitfalls with using that method or methods?
- Does the time frame for data collection for your study match the time frames found in the literature?
 - Their study took 12 months, you have one month
- What type of results were recorded with that particular method or methods?
 - What can you expect if you use that method?

Parts of literature review

- 3. Types and amounts of data acquired
 - Qualitative versus quantitative
 - Size of study: 10s of data points versus 100s of data points

Parts of literature review

4. Types of analysis used with the data
- What was done with the data after it was acquired
 - Statistical, descriptive, computer modeling

Parts of literature review

5. Types of results those studies have been reporting
- Need to know what others reported to judge your own results
 - Your results may not support the literature

Parts of literature review

6. **Where** have past studies been completed?
- How does it compare to where your study will be done? Similar population? Similar physical characteristics?
 - You have to justify why are study area will be where it is.

Lit review issues

- Lit review can go on forever – be efficient, be thorough, then move on
- If your literature search process ends too quickly, it may not be because no one has done any work on it – your search may be flawed
- Relying only on a few sources to find your literature – can miss something important



Lit review

- After collecting all the lit: you need to deal with it and find a logical way to utilize the lit
- Realize that the literature review is best at leading you to other literature – find a way to constrain it
- It is not to be a review supporting everything you are doing in the study.

Characterize the lit

- Beyond the literature on methods, there are other aspects to be considered:
- How has the literature changed over time?
- To what degree does the literature address your problem?
- Will your research be original?
- Which aspects of the problem receive the most attention?
- Which authors account for several works and seem to be frequently cited?

Evaluate the lit

- Is the research well done [note especially the method and data collection]?
- How close is it to what you wish to do?
- What are the major findings, conclusions, and recommendations?
- Do these support the need for your particular research?

After you have finished: Move on to next step and/or write-up

Realize that the lit review is not necessarily done until the whole project is done.
